

GENERAL EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT (GED) TEST

The GED Test is a test that certifies the taker has attained American or Canadian high school academic skills. To pass the GED, the test taker must perform in at least the 40th percentile of high school seniors nationwide, though individual states can set their own requirements for passing. Some states also require that students take an additional test showing an understanding of federal, state and/or local government.

The GED is taken by individuals who did not earn a high school diploma. Common reasons for GED recipients not having received a high school diploma include immigration to the United States or Canada, homeschooling, and leaving high school early due to a lack of interest, the inability to pass required tests, or personal problems.

More than 15 million students have received the GED since its inception. One in every seven Americans with high school credentials received the GED, as well as one in twenty college students. 70% of GED recipients complete at least the 10th grade before leaving school, and the same number are over the age of 19, with the average age being 24.

In addition to English, the GED test is available in Spanish, French, large print, audiocassette, and braille. Tests and test preparation are routinely offered in correctional facilities and on military bases in addition to more traditional settings. American and Canadian students living outside of those two countries can take the GED test on-line.

HISTORY OF THE GED

The GED test was originally developed in 1942. Two primary reasons for developing the test were the number of American men being sent overseas to fight in World War II before they could complete their high school education, and the number of people leaving school early to join the largely industrial work force.

In 1972, a new series of the test was released. While the test designed in 1942 was adequate for a time period in which most jobs were industrial and required no education beyond high school, the marketplace in the required a broader understanding of academic subjects. The new series addressed this issue, and also better prepared students for education beyond the high school level. The 1972 series also required more critical thinking than the 1942 edition, which mainly required the student to recall general facts.

The series was revised for the third time in 1988. The most noticeable change to the series was the addition of a writing sample, which had never been required before. A greater emphasis was placed on socially relevant topics, and more problem-solving skills needed to be demonstrated. For the first time, more students (65%) were taking the test to continue their education beyond college than to get better employment (30%).

The GED series currently used is the 2002 series, which is considered to be the most challenging series so far. More business -related topics are covered, and the test contains more questions and written passages relevant to adults. Although students are not required to perform a scientific experiment, they must explain how to conduct one, interpret results, and apply information gathered. Written passages are also more multicultural, reflecting the large number of immigrants taking the test.

PRETESTING AND REGISTRATION

In order to register to take the GED testing battery, most students must show their level of competency by taking *pretests*. In most districts, students are required to take a mathematics pretest, followed by one additional test in a subject area of their choosing. (Students cannot take the essay portion, as they cannot be graded by anyone other than test administrators.) Each of these tests contain 25 questions which are representative of what will be asked on the actual GED test; no time limit is given.

In most districts, students must answer approximately 15-20 questions accurately in order to register to take the GED test. Proof of identity and residency are required in order to register; accepted forms of identification include driver's licenses, birth certificates, and passports. Students must then fill out forms that are submitted to their individual state and local school or adult education district(s) for review in order to ensure the student has officially withdrawn from the school system. Depending on the district, a student will have to wait anywhere from one week to three months to take the actual GED test.

If a student does not receive a desirable score on the pretests, they will most likely not be allowed to register for the GED test. In this case, they will be encouraged to privately study until they are ready to take the pretests again, or they will be enrolled in an adult education program in order to prepare for the GED test.

TEST PREPARATION

In response to the low pass rate (30%) for most people taking the test for the first time, local adult education boards have begun to offer intensive tutoring for GED seekers, often financed by state boards of education and frequently free of charge to students.

During these classes, usually held at least once a week, students review the high school material that they learned in a traditional school setting, and they are also taught about subjects they did not receive formal instruction in. Textbooks are used for these classes, and homework is often assigned to students. Individual tutoring is also offered in some districts.

Due to the diverse subject areas covered by the GED test, many different topics are covered in preparatory classes and textbooks. Students will typically cover many topics in these classes that will not come up on the GED test itself. For example, a student may spend several months learning about medieval history, only to find that questions about the time period do not appear on their final test. This is done to ensure that the student truly does have a broad understanding of each of the topic areas, and has not simply "crammed" for the test prior to taking it.

In addition to formal test preparation, students are also able and encouraged to prepare on their own in private. As with similar tests, many test preparation books are offered for the GED. These books offer practice tests, tips for passing the GED test, and guidelines to help students determine areas in which they need improvement. Many books also offer extensive information on the various subject areas covered by the test, similar to textbooks students use in traditional high school settings. Students can read books that cover all academic areas of the test, or just the area(s) in which they need more assistance. Some commercial tutoring centers also offer preparation specifically for the GED test.

HOW THE TEST WORKS

Although the term "GED test" is often used, students must pass 5 individual tests in order to obtain their GED. These are known collectively as the *testing battery*. The five tests in the battery are: Language Arts, Writing; Social Studies, Science; Language Arts Reading; and Mathematics. The Language Arts, Writing test is further divided into Part I and Part II, and the Mathematics test is split into a calculator-optional portion and a calculator-free one.

Depending on the state and district, students may or may not have to take all of the tests at the same time. Due to the length of the testing battery, most districts divide the tests into two or more days, and testing sessions are not always consecutive. In larger districts, students are usually given the option of taking their tests on multiple consecutive days or evenings, or they can take them on two consecutive weekends, depending on which time frame is more convenient for them.

LANGUAGE ARTS, WRITING

Part I

The Language Arts, Writing testing portion is divided into two parts. Part I covers sentence structure, organization, usage, and mechanics. Students are provided with passages which they are then asked to correct or improve according to standards, or equivalent standards in the French version of the test offered in Canada.

30% of Part I covers structure, 15% organization, 30% usage, and 25% mechanics. Common questions include asking students to identify where punctuation should be placed and how sentences in a paragraph should be arranged for maximum clarity. Common misspellings, subject-verb agreement, and capitalization, and are also covered. Students receive 75 minutes to complete the 50 questions comprising Part I.

Part II

Part II of the Language Arts, Writing test requires the student to write an essay. Students have 45 minutes to complete the essay, though anyone who finishes Part I early can add the remaining time from that portion to their essay writing period. A passing essay must have at least 5 paragraphs and must contain a clearly defined introduction, body, and conclusion. The introduction must contain a thesis statement as well as preview sentences of the body. The body should contain three paragraphs, each containing separate yet related ideas that develop the main idea. The final paragraph must adequately and coherently summarize the whole essay.

All essay subjects are assigned. The topics selected do not require any special knowledge or advance reading on the student's part; instead, they focus on general interest topics that most people are familiar with and comfortable discussing, verbally or in print. Example subjects include the influence of violent music on teenagers, the advantages or disadvantages of a "child-free" lifestyle, and the importance of receiving a diploma in modern society.

Part II is the only test within the GED testing battery that is not scored by computer. The essay is read by two reviewers within the state or testing district where the test has been taken. These reviewers each assign the essay a score between 1 (worst) and 4 (best); the scores are then averaged to find the final score. If a student receives an average score of less than 2, Part I is not scored and the student has to take both parts of the Language Arts, Writing test again. In

some districts, a student must pass the essay before they are allowed to take any other tests in the battery.

SOCIAL STUDIES

The Social Studies portion of the GED testing battery covers 5 main content areas. 25% of the test focuses on American History, 15% on world history, 25% on civics and government, 20% on economics, and 15% on geography. Students are given 70 minutes to answer the 50 questions asked on the Social Studies test.

Like the majority of the GED testing battery, the Social Studies test requires the student to read short passages, after which they select answers to questions using a multiple-choice format. Some of the passages used come from famous documents like the Declaration of Independence and United States Supreme Court decisions. Many use graphs, charts, and other types of images in addition to or in place of written passages, which the student then must use to arrive at the appropriate conclusion; on graphical questions, some basic mathematical skills may be required. Others involve editorial cartoons, typically with no context provided, that the student must examine critically. At least one question on each test asks the student to look at a photograph and identify a famous figure, moment in history, or the general scene being depicted, such as a political rally or child labor.

Questions involving civics and government and economics rely heavily on practical documents, such as tax forms, voter registration forms, and workplace and personal budgets. Topics such as global warming and environmental law are addressed by the questions about geography.

SCIENCE

The Science test, which contains 50 questions that must be answered in 80 minutes, contains questions about life science (45%), earth and space science (20%), and physical science (35%).

Most questions on the Science test involve a graphic such as a map, graph, chart, or diagram. Subjects covered include photosynthesis, weather and climate, geology, magnetism, energy and cell division. Few of the questions require the student to demonstrate outside knowledge, since most are dependent on the text and graphics provided. Questions that do require outside knowledge are generally questions about common, everyday scientific matters, such as "Which household product can be hazardous when mixed with bleach?" (Answer: ammonia.)

LANGUAGE ARTS, READING

The Language Arts, Reading test contains 40 questions that must be answered within 65 minutes. Passages from various texts are provided, after which students are asked to think critically about the subjects, characters, and ideas presented and answer approximately 5 questions about each passage. The questions asked are used to judge a student's level of comprehension as well as their skills with application, analysis, evaluation, and synthesis.

Two non-fiction and three fiction passages are presented, along with one passage from a poem and another from a dramatic play. Common sources for text selections are famous novels, such as *My Antonia* by Willa Cather, and the works of famous poets like Maya Angelou and Robert Frost. Students are not expected to have read these works prior to taking the test, though students who have a broad knowledge of literature are known to perform better on the Language Arts, Reading test due to their ability to place each passage in context more easily when thinking critically about them.

MATHEMATICS

Like the Language Arts, Writing test, the Mathematics test is divided into two parts, though they are not as distinct as the former's parts. The test's 50 questions, to which students have 90 minutes to respond, are divided in half, with the first half being calculator-optional.

The Mathematics test focuses on four main mathematical disciplines: numbers and operations (20-30%), measurement and data analysis (20-30%), algebra (20-30%), and geometry (20-30%). Approximately 20% of the test uses standard grids and coordinate plane; these questions are not multiple choice.

Common topics covered include circumference, square roots, ratios and proportions, the multiplying and dividing of vulgar fractions and decimals, volume, exponents, angles, and the Pythagorean Theorem. Students must have at least a basic knowledge of both the American measurement system as well as the metric system in order to answer many questions.

Calculators are issued at the testing site, and no external calculators may be used. Scrap paper is also provided so students may work problems out using pen or pencil, though no paper may be taken out of the testing room after completion in order to prevent students from giving their answers to others who may not have taken the test yet. Students are also provided with a list of common formulas, though this is controversial because some critics consider this to be too much assistance for those taking the test.

TEST ADMINISTRATION

There are more than 3,500 testing sites in the United States and Canada. Testing sites differ from district to district, but they are most commonly municipal high schools or other public schools.

For students in large population areas, they often have a choice of two or more testing sites, which they can list according to preference when registering to take the GED test. The test administrator(s) will then determine which site each student may take their test at by reviewing factors such as distance from home; the number of students taking the test on any given day; and whether or not two students taking the test at the same place and time have ever been in school together previously, which could indicate a desire for them to cheat off of each other's work.

GED testing sites are kept as controlled environments. The only items all students are allowed to bring into the testing room are pens, pencils, and erasers. In some districts, food and drink is allowed for students who are taking all 5 tests in the same day, in order to prevent them from becoming famished or ill during breaks. Any items other than writing implements, including food, coats, and hats, are subject to confiscation by the test administrator(s), and may only be given back before the test's conclusion unless a need is demonstrated.

There are approximately 25 different editions of the GED tests that are used by administrators. This is done to prevent students from cheating off of each other's work. Each edition of the test is assigned a number as well as a color; for example, one test edition might be both "3" and "yellow." Each student uses the same edition for the entire testing battery to make scoring easier. Other students taking the test at the same time and place will use a different edition of the test. All editions are judged to be at the same level of difficulty, and each version contains the same number of questions in each skill area.

STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

For students with documented physical disabilities, there are numerous accommodations available. Students with vision impairments can use braille, audiocassette, or large print editions, as well as talking calculators. Students with physical disabilities can receive additional time, scribes, frequent breaks, use of a private room, and other accommodations as required. Sign language interpreters are available, and tests can be conducted at a person's home or health facility if they are unable to travel.

For students with learning disabilities, such as dyslexia, attention-deficit disorder, Asperger's syndrome, and dyscalculia, accommodations can be made with written proof of the disability. As with students with physical disabilities, students with learning disabilities can receive extra time, use of a private room, or any other accommodations deemed necessary.

In order to receive accommodations, students must present documentation of their disabilities to the test administrator well in advance of the testing date. If students do not submit their request for review by the deadline, they will most likely be turned down for accommodations. Exceptions to this rule include students who break a limb in the days before their test or are hospitalized. If a student requests accommodations and is turned down, they can either wait until the next testing date available or submit an appeal to their state's board of education.

PASSING THE GED TESTING BATTERY

The maximum score anyone can receive on an individual GED test is 800. A score of 800 puts the student in the top 1% of all test-takers for that individual test nationally. The minimum passing score varies from state to state.

If a student passes some but not all tests within the battery, they are not required to retake the entire battery; instead, they only need to retake the portion(s) they did not pass. In most states, students are limited to a set amount of times they can take any portion of the battery each year, meaning that there will generally be a waiting period of a few months or more before they can take the failed test again. Students can take any test as many times as it takes them to pass, though most states charge a fee for each retest. In California, and in most states, test-takers must achieve a standard score of at least 410 on each of the five GED subtests, and earn an average standard score of 450 or higher. Minimum scores and averages are also set for honors diplomas. In some districts, graduation ceremonies are held for GED graduates, and scholarships are also awarded to the highest scorers each session.

The GED itself is issued by the state or territory in which the student resides, though it is scored by a national testing service located in Maryland. Like other diplomas, they are valid and accepted in each U.S. state.

COLLEGES, EMPLOYERS, AND THE GED

People who left high school without graduating often find that employers and post-secondary institutions will not accept them without showing some form of academic competency. Since adults often cannot or will not return to high school, receiving the GED allows them to demonstrate that they possess a skill level comparable to that of an average high school graduate.

Approximately 95% of colleges will accept GED graduates, though they will typically require them to take the SATs and/or ACT. Some admissions boards request extra letters of recommendation in addition to the standard number already required of applicants when

reviewing GED applicants. (Homeschooled students who receive the GED are the main exception to this rule, since many homeschooled students cannot receive traditional diplomas and need to finish their high school careers with the GED.) If a 4-year college will not accept a GED graduate, they can attend any community college in the United States, after which they can transfer to almost any 4-year school.

The main problem GED recipients encounter when trying to transfer from community colleges to 4-year schools is the lack of SAT and/or ACT scores, which GED recipients typically do not have. Due to this and other factors, most colleges do not require transfer students to submit such scores when applying beyond a certain point in their college careers, typically after one year or earning approximately 30 college-level credits. Many colleges, especially public institutions, also offer scholarships and other forms of financial aid specifically for GED recipients in order to help them finance their education.

CRITICISM OF THE GED

For most purposes, a GED is considered to be the same as a high school diploma. Some feel the test is easier than it should be, and it is looked down upon by some employers as a lower form of degree than an actual high school diploma. Others believe the GED is harder than it should be; according to GED Testing Service statistics from the "2003 GED Statistical Report," the number of candidates who tested, completed, and passed the tests declined in 2002 and 2003. Some attribute this decline to the new test released in 2000 being too difficult.

The most common criticism is of the test battery's mainly multiple choice format. Others argue that the reading comprehension test is too simplistic, and that there are too many basic operations on the mathematics portion and not enough advanced algebra and geometry questions.

Supporters argue that the 70% rate of incompleteness on the first try at taking the test shows that it is harder than commonly believed. They also point out that the test is administered to a representative sample of graduating high school seniors each year, and about 30% fail.¹

In response to these criticisms, the test was revised in 2002 to make it more difficult to pass. One of the most important revisions was one which made it more difficult to guess correct answers from the choices provided. This greater degree of difficulty is achieved by demanding students to show the *process* for finding the correct answer to a question, as opposed to simply providing a result. For example, a typical mathematics question will not ask what the second leg of a right triangle is when the length of only the first leg and the hypotenuse is given, but instead which formula should be used to find the correct answer. This requires the student to not only know the correct answer, but also explain how to find it. It also uses both algebra and geometry, as opposed to just one discipline of mathematics.

A number of the questions also contain options such as "Not enough information given," "None of the above," and "No correction is necessary" as possible answers. These are found most frequently on the Mathematics and Language Arts, Writing: Part I tests.

THE ABILITY TO BENEFIT (ATB) TESTS

Many variations of the ATB tests are accessible to students. As demonstrated below, the passing scores vary extensively. Passing test scores depend upon the test taken and are listed below. The tests listed below were approved in 2001. The United States Secretary of Education noticed a review to extend the current Ability to Benefit test list and will publish a list of approved tests which can be used by postsecondary educational institutions to establish the ability to benefit for a student who does not have a high school diploma or its equivalent for Student Financial Assistance Programs.

Duration of Approval: The Secretary approves each of these tests for five years from the date of the Secretary's written notice to the test publisher, unless the Secretary withdraws this approval or the publisher requests that approval of a test be withdrawn. In either case, the Secretary will publish a notice in the Federal Register indicating this change. Users are referred to the test publisher's technical manual for computing these scores.

1. **American College Testing (ACT):** (English and Math)
Passing Scores: English (14) and Math (15).
Publisher: American College Testing (ACT), Placement Assessment Programs
2201 North Dodge Street, P.O. Box 168, Iowa City, Iowa 52243
Contact: Dr. James Maxey
Telephone: (319) 337-1100, Fax: (319) 337-1790.
2. **ASSET Program: Basic Skills Tests** (Reading, Writing, and Numerical)-Forms B2 and C2.
Passing Scores: Reading (34), Writing (34), and Numerical (33).
Publisher: American College Testing (ACT) Placement Assessment Programs
2201 North Dodge Street,
P.O. Box 168, Iowa City, Iowa 52243
Contact: Dr. John D. Roth
Telephone: (319) 337-1030
Fax: (319) 337-1790
3. **Career Programs Assessment (CPAT)** Basic Skills Subtests Language Usage, Reading and Numerical)-Forms A, B, and C.
Passing Scores: Language Usage (43), Reading (44), and Numerical (42)
Publisher: American College Testing (ACT), Placement Assessment Programs
2201 North Dodge Street
P.O. Box 168, Iowa City, Iowa 52243
Contact: Dr. John D. Roth
Telephone: (319) 337-1030, Fax: (319) 337-1790.
4. **COMPASS Subtests:** Prealgebra/Numerical Skills Placement, Reading Placement, and Writing Placement.
Passing Scores: Prealgebra/Numerical (21), Reading (60), and Writing (31).
Publisher: American College Testing (ACT), Placement Assessment Programs, 2201 North Dodge Street,
P.O. Box 168, Iowa City, Iowa 52243,
Contact: Dr. John D. Roth,
Telephone: (319) 337-1030, Fax: (319) 337-1790.
5. **Computerized Placement Tests (CPTs)/Accuplacer:** (Reading Comprehension, Sentence Skills, and Arithmetic)
Passing Scores: Reading Comprehension (52), Sentence Skills (60), and Arithmetic (36).
Publisher: 45 Columbus Avenue, New York, New York 10023-6992

Contact: Ms. Loretta M. Church
Telephone: (212) 713-8000, Fax: (212) 713-8063.

6. **Descriptive Tests of Language Skills (DTLS):** (Reading Comprehension, Sentence Structure and Conventions of Written English)-Forms M-K-3KDT and M-K-3LDT;
Descriptive Tests of Mathematical Skills (DTMS): (Arithmetic)-Forms M-K-3KDT and M-K-3LDT.
Passing Scores: Reading Comprehension (108), Sentence Structure (9), Conventions of Written English (309), and Arithmetic (506).
Publisher: The College Board
45 Columbus Avenue, New York, New York 10023-6992
Contact: Ms. Loretta M. Church
Telephone: (212) 713-8000, Fax: (212) 713-8063
7. **Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE):** (Reading Total, Total Mathematics, Total Language)-Forms 5 and 6, Level A, Complete Battery and Survey Versions.
Passing Scores: Reading Total (768), Total Mathematics (783), Total Language (714).
Publisher: CTB/McGraw-Hill
20 Ryan Ranch Road
Monterey, California 939405703
Contact: Ms. Tina Gwaltney
Telephone: (831) 393-7749, Fax: (831) 393-7142
8. **Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE):** (Reading, Total Mathematics, Language)-Forms 7 and 8, Level A, Complete Battery and Survey Versions.
Passing Scores: Reading (559), Total Mathematics (562), Language (545)
Publisher: CTB/McGraw-Hill
20 Ryan Ranch Road
Monterey, California 939405703
Contact: Ms. Tina Gwaltney
Telephone: (831) 393-7749, Fax: (831) 393-7142
9. **Wonderlic Basic Skills Test (WBST):** Verbal Forms VS-1 & VS-2, Quantitative Forms QS-1 & QS-2
Passing scores: Verbal (200) and Quantitative (210)
Publisher: 1509 N. Milwaukee Ave.
Libertyville, IL 600481380
Contact: Mr. Victor S. Artese
Telephone: (800) 323-374, Fax: (847) 680-9492